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MARKETING MAINE POTATOES.

Many potato growers in Maine feel that the prevailing low prices on the crop which means so much to them are not justified. In fact, numerous complaints received by the Office of Markets and Rural Organization indicate general dissatisfaction. Conditions without doubt are bad. Still it does not appear that they are in any way peculiar to Maine. According to recent reports the prevailing prices to commercial growers at principal loading stations in Michigan were 18 to 25 cents per bushel; in Minnesota, 20 to 30 cents per bushel; in Wisconsin, 17 to 30 cents per bushel; in New York, 20 to 30 cents per bushel; in northern Maine, 18 to 30 cents per bushel, and at Maine Central points 22 to 30 cents per bushel. The dissatisfaction, however, is not surprising when it is considered that the estimated cost to the Maine farmer of producing and delivering potatoes at the car averages 30 cents per bushel.

The total production (not commercial crop) for the United States and for Maine for each of the last four years is estimated by the Bureau of Crop Estimates of the Department of Agriculture as follows:

Geographical area.	1911	1912	1913	1914
United States	292,737,000	420,647,000	331,525,000	405,921,000
Maine	21,240,000	23,166,000	28,160,000	33,800,000

The same bureau recently estimated that in the principal producing States of the North 52.8 per cent of the marketable supply of potatoes, or 166,846,000 bushels, of the 1914 crop was still in the hands of growers and dealers on January 1, 1915, and that in the New England States alone 60 per cent remained in the growers' and dealers' hands.

The extremely heavy production, together with present unsettled conditions, is usually conceded to be chiefly responsible for the unsatisfactory prices which have ruled during the past several months.

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These same conditions have seriously affected prices on almost all vegetables and fruits since early last summer. This is especially true with regard to cucumbers, tomatoes, cabbages, onions, potatoes, cantaloupes, grapes, cherries, peaches, pears, apples, oranges, and grapefruit.

Potatoes of best quality have met a fairly steady demand, but, as usual in seasons of heavy production, the quantity of common to poor stock on the market has been hard to move. Reports of conditions in several large markets of the country for the week ending February 20 indicate that wholesale prices were approximately as follows:

New York	34 to 57¢ per bushel.
Boston	42 to 45¢ per bushel.
Philadelphia	40 to 63¢ per bushel.
Baltimore	40 to 60¢ per bushel.
Washington	45 to 60¢ per bushel.
Pittsburgh	42 to 50¢ per bushel.
Chicago	40 to 50¢ per bushel.
Cincinnati	45 to 50¢ per bushel.
St. Louis	45 to 50¢ per bushel.
Kansas City	48 to 55¢ per bushel.

It is reported from New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia that accumulations of potatoes in the railroad yards adjacent to these three cities during the week ending February 6 were nearly 800 cars, 100 cars, and 90 cars, respectively.

Judging by reports at hand, retail quotations in the important northern markets range from 15 to 30 cents per peck, with larger quantities proportionately less. These prices vary as a rule according to the distance from the point of production, the quality of the stock, and the quantity sold whether in lots of one-quarter peck, one-half peck, peck, bushel, bag, or barrel. Another very important factor governing the retail price of potatoes is the type of store in which they are sold. The cash and chain stores, many of which do not make deliveries, sell potatoes as a rule at considerably lower prices than do credit stores. The chain stores have the additional advantage of being able to buy in large quantities.

As compared with methods used in marketing California and Florida citrus fruits, western deciduous fruits and potatoes, Ozark berries, Georgia peaches, and even Virginia, New Jersey, and Long Island potatoes, Maine growers have not developed a comprehensive and efficient marketing system, for they still depend to a large extent upon the local dealer, not only to sell most of their crop, but also to store a large part of it. Of still greater importance is the fact that they have no established grades on either eating or seed potatoes, no well-known brands, and consequently no basis for an advertising campaign.

HARVESTING AND MARKETING.

The fact that the Maine growing season is short and that it is necessary to rush harvesting operations is responsible for many of the growers' difficulties. At the start considerable quantities of immature potatoes are dug. While a ripe potato may be bruised and cut badly enough as it is "kicked off" the digger, this action is harder on the immature stock. The result is that carrying and keeping qualities are often affected to a marked degree. Potatoes loaded from the field into cars are not so well graded, as a rule, as those loaded later from cellars or through dealers' houses. Some of these early fall shipments, although sound, do not show up well on the market, and this immature, easily bruised stock, especially in hot, muggy weather, often heats, turns black, and rots.

Last fall the early freeze in Maine caught enough potatoes on the ground, in barrels in the field, or on the track in cars to cause Maine farmers and shippers much trouble and heavy losses. Many cars so affected were shipped without sorting out the damaged tubers, with the result that much deterioration developed before the stock could be moved through the market channels. At one time the New York market, becoming tired of this continual trouble, turned to New York State potatoes almost to the exclusion of the Maine product. Many cars of sacked and bulk potatoes arriving on the large markets contained just enough frosted tubers to show a few "rots," which would wet the potatoes or sacks near them. This condition caused them to be sold at from $1 to $1.25 per barrel or sack, while sound stock brought around $1.50 to $1.65. The freight, of course, was as high on the low-grade potatoes as on the fancy.

One car personally inspected by a representative of the Office of Markets and Rural Organization in the New York yards contained so many spoiled potatoes that the bulkhead boards were wet 2 feet from the floor. This car showed probably one-half loss when sorted. The contents, valued approximately at $200 in Maine, were worth in New York with freight added about $315. Therefore, a loss of one-half in Maine would have amounted to $100 only, but in New York it meant a loss of $157.50, without taking into consideration the extra expense of sorting. If these potatoes had been held in Maine until the frost damage was determined and the culls were removed the loss doubtless would not have been over 25 per cent, or $50, because many cut and bruised potatoes had started to spoil through contact with the bad stock in the car.

Shippers, as a rule, lose heavily when a car must be discounted on account of inferior quality. They lose the amount chargeable to freight and labor on all stock sorted out, and, in addition, the value of this poor stock at the shipping point, for most of it could have been sold to starch factories at fair prices or fed on the farm.

There is a constant complaint on the part of growers and farm papers that too great a difference exists between the retailer's selling price on potatoes and the price received by the farmer. Without doubt, this is true. However, the retailer replies, on just as good ground, that if potatoes were so graded that they would reach him in proper condition to deliver to the consumer, as do most of the other products which he handles, he could sell on a smaller margin, for it then would be unnecessary for him to stand the losses which now accrue from potatoes that must be culled out on account of their poor quality or condition, and from the labor necessary to do this work.

It is reported that considerable dissatisfaction has been evidenced recently in the South regarding the poor quality and condition of Maine seed potatoes. The growers in Maine have at stake too large a seed-potato trade to disregard further these complaints and take chances of losing business or prestige by the careless handling of seed stock. Other northern sections are organizing to standardize their product and secure the seed trade, so it behooves Maine growers to put forth conscientious efforts to place their seed-potato business on a higher standard.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED MARKETING CONDITIONS.

The Maine potato area in its rather restricted territory offers an ideal opportunity for concerted effort on the part of the growers, and the possibilities in this field for an efficient, aggressive cooperative marketing organization are almost unlimited. That attempts at cooperative marketing have been made before with disappointing results in several instances should not deter growers from further efforts in this direction. With the whole-hearted backing of the farmers, one properly established federated agency in Maine, strictly cooperative in form, should be able to give to the potato industry at least a portion of the benefits that have been evidenced in the citrus business as a result of the work of the California and Florida exchanges.

The present system of handling and marketing Maine potatoes is sadly lacking in four principal considerations, and until these deficiences are remedied it would appear that little can be done to increase the average net returns that have ruled during the past few years. Radical improvements must be made along the following lines:

1. The establishment of uniform grades and brands.
2. The exercise of greater care in handling potatoes from the field through to the wholesaler.
3. Thorough inspection of all eating and seed stock.
4. The adoption of seed types, standards, and guaranties.

The first and principal reason for advocating uniform grades and standards for potatoes, or any other crop, is to establish a basis on

which buyer and seller may deal with mutual understanding and confidence. The second reason, and perhaps one of just as great importance, is to eliminate loss and waste, which, in the final analysis, is paid for by the grower and consumer.

Complaints as to inferior quality usually come under some of the following heads: Undersize, coarse, scab, dry rot, blight, frost, immaturity, second growth, irregular shape, hollow, cut, and bruised. New York and Boston receivers point particularly to the heavy losses which accrue from frosted stock which on arrival is wet from rot, from stock which is immature or cut and bruised, and from that which is ungraded for size. Greater care throughout would overcome to a large degree all of these faults.

Few growers and shippers seem to realize the losses due to rough handling—the factor which causes a large percentage of the cutting, bruising, and consequent decay. If they could see these injured potatoes in the retail store they would appreciate better one of the chief reasons for the considerable advance in price which the retailer is obliged to make in order to cover the loss he suffers from partly spoiled or otherwise unsalable potatoes.

Maine growers, when urged to improve their grades, usually point out the fact that they can not realize enough more from carefully-handled stock to warrant the increased expense which good grading entails. Under the marketing system now in operation there, this is no doubt true. Conditions are such that the higher price paid for a well-graded product does not always reach the producer's pocket. If the grower would have this increase, it is quite evident that he must assume greater responsibility in the marketing of his goods and be able, through cooperation with his neighbors, to exercise a more far-reaching supervision over the movement of these goods through trade channels. It would seem, however, that even under the present system, the various dealers involved would find it to their advantage if they would offer greater incentive to the grower to handle and grade his crop more carefully.

Inasmuch as most of the Maine stock which is not shipped from the field (roughly estimated at three-fourths of the average crop) is "racked" or sorted at some time or place by the farmer or local dealer it would cost little more to grade these potatoes according to uniform fixed standards than it costs to leave in so many culls, as is done at present.

The largest potato exchange in Virginia, and probably in the United States, insists on a rigid inspection of each carload by trained inspectors. Then if the stock meets the requirements of the best grade under which their potatoes are sold, it may be shipped under the label designated for the first grade, which has gained an almost Nation-wide reputation. This organization, not content with the

measure of success thus far attained, is making a renewed and persistent effort to increase the efficiency of its system. Other examples could be cited, particularly in the Western States, of potato sections that are approaching a satisfactory solution of their marketing problems through cooperative effort, and that, too, in localities where such effort is attended with greater natural difficulties than would be the case in Maine.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GRADING RULES.

The following specifications are submitted only as a basis for careful study and investigation. They suggest the points which it is felt should be considered in establishing standards for the handling and marketing of potatoes in any State.

"Extra Fancy Grade."—Designed for boxed, wrapped, baking potatoes; size and specifications to suit demand.

"No. 1" or "Fancy Grade."—Potatoes of this grade shall be of one variety, true to name, containing none that would not run over a 1⅞-inch screen, and not over 10 per cent that would not run over a 2-inch screen. Except for the tolerance, the potatoes shall be ripe, clean, smooth, free from irregular growths, disease, scab, cuts, and bruises. Not over 5 per cent tolerance shall be permitted on any one defect, and not over 10 per cent on any combination of defects. This grade shall be sacked in clean 2-bushel sacks, securely sewed, the face of the sack showing a fair average of the contents.

"No. 2" or "Choice Grade."—The potatoes in this grade shall be of the same size as "No. 1" or "Fancy Grade," but this grade will allow 10 per cent tolerance over the "No. 1" or "Fancy Grade" on defects and all other points, but nothing shall be included which is not strictly merchantable. This grade may be either sacked or shipped in bulk.

Only two grades, besides the boxed potatoes, should be encouraged, inasmuch as potatoes not good enough for one of these two grades should not be offered on the market. Such standards would encourage, without doubt, the production of better potatoes, and would be instrumental also in promoting more careful handling.

Those interested in the distribution of Maine potatoes feel that much loss might be eliminated through the shipment of potatoes in 2-bushel sacks, instead of in bulk, or in 11 or 12 peck bags, as is now the custom. Potatoes which are repeatedly shoveled into and dumped from barrels receive much unnecessary injury. The 2-bushel bag can be handled by one man, whereas movement of the larger bag necessitates two men, and in some places the use of hooks is tolerated.

Most of the potatoes shipped in bulk are sacked or barreled before reaching the consumer, and inasmuch as the handling of the stock in such packages greatly reduces the necessary labor and possibilities

of loss, it would seem advisable to require the use of sacks at least for all potatoes shipped under the "No. 1" or "Fancy Grade."

The shipment of "Field Run" stock should be discouraged if not entirely eliminated. When the progressive growers of a section are endeavoring to build up a reputation by carefully grading their potatoes and advertising the brands, it works serious harm to allow the more careless growers to ship the very ordinary product which is put out, as a rule, under the name of "Field Run." In seasons of light production it is a temptation to nearly all growers to disregard the more strict grading rules and risk injuring the reputation acquired, by shipping "Field Run" stock, if such a grade is recognized. Potatoes shipped under this grade are often a source of dissatisfaction to the trade even in seasons when the crop is light, and there is some doubt if the practice ever pays in the end, considering the fact that the shipment of such stock is a very poor advertisement, and if placed on the market early, as is generally the case, it is very apt to set a low standard for prices on potatoes from that territory during the rest of the season.

During the past year a movement was inaugurated to bring about a satisfactory potato-seed inspection and certification service. The potato specialists of the Department of Agriculture at Washington, in cooperation with the agricultural departments of the principal potato-seed-producing States, are endeavoring to improve the quality of potato stock, with reference to freedom from disease, trueness to type, and freedom from varietal mixtures.

The growers of Maine should take advantage of this opportunity to secure the cooperation of these experts, as this official potato-seed inspection and certification not only will assist in placing the seed business on a proper basis, but will tend to improve the quality of the entire crop.

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